5: Cremona B-3, 4 (no date) 1923
EZ6 Malta EZ6

Maltese Death, Mourning, and Funeral Customs.

Sir James Frazer's communication of a coroner's note about "Beliefs regarding Death in Cumberland"[1] has suggested to me that I might put on record Maltese funeral customs now extant, some of which are analogous to those noticed in Cumberland.

Amongst our middle and lower classes the practice still lingers of placing a dish of salt on the stomach of the corpse, whether of a male or of a female. The popular belief in Malta is that the salt prevents early decomposition. Certeux and Carnoy[2] give the following interpretation of a practice by Arabs in Algeria: "*Il est de convenance religieuse . . . de lui poser sur le ventre* [of the dead person] *quelque chose de pesant, afin de prevenir le gonflement.*" One of our Maltese sayings runs:

"*Imût il-ghani u jmut il-fqir*
It-tnejn jitmelhu ghal geûûa il-bfir."

i.e. "Both the rich man and the poor man die, and both are salted for the pit" (a common rock tomb). This may, however, refer to the pickling or preservation of bodies in a saline solution.

The covering over of looking-glasses in the room where the body is lying is also practised by several Maltese families. Some go so far as to remove furniture, and turn round or take down pictures, in the death chamber and passages.

The following are the most characteristic features of existing Maltese practices, many of which are comparable to those of Sicily, while a few show some Eastern influence:—

(*a*) The washing of the dead body before shrouding. This is not a religious rite, and has no connection with that of Islam.

(*b*) The shutting of the eyelids, if open, and the raising of the chin by means of a band, usually a white kerchief, tied on the head.[3]

(*c*) The removal of door knockers and knobs; house doors are kept closed for several days[4]; neighbours half-shut their own.

[1] Vol. xxxi., p. 154.
[2] *L'Algerie Traditionelle*, p. 223.
[3] This is practised in Algeria. See Certeux and Carnoy, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

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In some districts doors or knockers are draped with black crape.

(*d*) The lowering of window blinds for some months. Some people, who follow old customs, replace all window curtains by linen sheets.

(*e*) The hiring of poor women and beggars to pray over and watch the corpse for the whole night. This custom prevails mostly in Gozo. In old days official female mourners, named *neūūieha* (from *neūūah*, "to cry") were employed. The practice was abolished in Malta during the plague of A.D. 1676.[1] Sicilians employed mourners called Praeficae or Reputatrices, a custom of Greek and Roman origin and practised by the Irish until A.D. 1849. It still prevails among the Corsicans and the Sahara tribes of Algeria. The old ceremonial of the Maltese female mourners is described by Abela as follows :—

They wore trailing veils (*kurkār*), and when they entered the premises of the deceased they cut down the bower vines in the yard and threw the flower pots from the balconies and windows into the street. They searched the house for the finest piece of china, dashed it on the floor, and mixed the fragments with ashes from the hearth. They boiled the whole together in a pot, and with the mixture washed the door posts and window shutters of the house. During these proceedings they sang couplets which ended in long-drawn sighs and lamentations. Then they gathered round the corpse and knelt down, extolling the virtues of the deceased, the relations joining in their mourning.

(*f*) An oil lamp is often lit and left for forty days before the Crucifix or image of the Madonna in the death chamber. This is supposed to please the soul of the departed, whose ghost is in this way prevented from haunting the house. In some of the Gozo villages the persons attending the corpse to the burial-ground return in procession after the funeral mass to the room of the deceased, where they kneel down and say the rosary before the Crucifix, placed on a chest covered with white cloth, and between two lighted candles which are afterwards replaced by the devotional oil lamps. The belief still lingers that the

[1] Abela and Ciantar, *Malta Illustrata*, vol. ii. p. 794.

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The belief still lingers that the
764 705 lamp must remain lighted for forty days, during which the soul of the departed remains above the flame.

764 735 171 (g) Some families give the poor bread. The love-feasts of the primitive Christians were in mediaeval times replaced in both Malta and Sicily by the distribution of cakes and of boiled wheat mixed with sesame. Distributions of meat and bread to the poor came also to be a custom at some *festas*, but were continued in Sicily mainly by the giving of beans and bread on All Souls' Day.[1] In Malta on that day, however, the old custom has been replaced by the free kitchens or the "Potage for the Poor" (*Borma tal-Fqâr*).

765 178 [177] [192] Mourning customs in Malta have during the last century passed through wide changes and, as in other European countries, have reverted to a more simple type. Some are purely mediaeval, and are influenced by the prolonged intercourse with Sicily and Italy during the rule of the Grand Masters. The vernacular term for mourning is *vistu*, corresponding to the Sicilian *visitusu* ("to be in mourning").

765 292 178 184 The wearing of special mourning clothes was general in the fourteenth century, but became less marked by the year 1700. Women used to wear woollen trailing skirts and dark shawls over their heads. Some better-class people wore one black transparent veil over the head and another veil of black silk taffeta over the gown, reaching to the waist. A sort of Majorca woollen cloth is prescribed for mourning wear to the heirs under a will of A.D. 1543. The Grand Master's suite wore a special garment called *Scoto*, of thin light serge. Although it is nowadays customary with some families to put on as little mourning as possible and to shorten its period, a full mourning dress is worn by others for two full years after the death of parents. The simplest style of mourning, a black necktie and a crape arm band, is in general use after the death of a distant relative.

765 178 [562] Family mourning is generally observed as follows:—

I. Closure of business premises, a mourning notice being affixed to the door.

II. Women keep indoors for a few weeks, only going out in

[1] G. Pitrè, *Spettacoli e Feste Popolari*, vol. xii. p. 407.

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Bombazine (without lace) or silk faldettas are now
292 the popular style. The vernacular *fulgána* and *ghonnella* for
192 the *faldetta* point to its probable origin; the word *ghonnella* is
765 derived from the Italian *gonnella*. The term *falda*, with its
178 diminutive *faldetta* (skirt), suggests that this hood or wimple
301 represents the tail of the skirt put over the head inside out in wet weather. Black stone trinkets are worn in place of those of gold. Women in both villages and towns who cannot afford to buy special trinkets cover their earrings with black stuff.

764 The old funeral rites, described by Abela and Ciantar from
[171] extracts from wills of the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries,
[177] are only faint survivals of the gorgeous pseudo-pagan rites which prevailed in all parts of continental Europe up to the period of the Reformation, and in Malta when under Italian influence. Up to 1872 the burial of the dead generally took
[192] place in churches or in churchyards (Maltese *zyutier*, from
[671] French *cimetière*). This still continues in country places, where people have family vaults. A law providing for extra-mural interment was proposed by De Rohan (A.D. 1775-1797), but it was only enforced by the Police Law of 1869, when a public cemetery was provided in 1871.

764 Since the adoption of the new burial law, funeral customs
178 have assumed a very simple character. Old custom required that the dead body should be placed on a handbarrow or in a coffin with a cushion stuffed with laurel and orange leaves
[534] fixed under the head. The body was then conveyed to the church, with the relatives and friends following, and the wailing of the mourners accompanied by the sound of bagpipes, which in some villages are now replaced by violins and counterbases to which lamentations are sung. Since the opening of the Addolorata Cemetery the dead are generally transported in
[533] hearses. The tolling of funeral bells was once so important
[177] that in many wills careful provision was made for it, and it even rivalled the usual charitable bequests. This corresponds to
764 Sicilian custom in the fifteenth century. After burial of the corpse, a black carpet or coverlet, or a velvet counterpane, was laid over the grave, and left there for some days. The offering
[184] of flowers to the dead is at present in great favour amongst the less educated, but some of the higher class object to it as a pro-

fanation

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fanation. Wreaths are laid on the grave, and oil lamps are lit on it for some days. The construction and decoration of the graves in the public cemetery is much the same as on the continent. Marble slabs with inscriptions are very common. Pillars with crosses on the top and sacred statues are also erected on bases of marble, or bronze reliefs symbolising Time and Eternity. The higher class own vaults in the form of chapels, in which an altar is erected and requiem masses are said.

In the professional and educated classes cards expressing sympathy are sent by friends to the mourning family, but in some districts, especially in the country, people still follow the old etiquette of paying a mourning visit within nine days of the death. Photographs of the deceased, with an inscription, are sent to friends and acquaintances.

A. CREMONA.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

852 it is a sign of a liberal character—if he
[787 picks out the inkstand it points towards
828] inclination for trade or the bar—if he takes the book, the rosary or the candle the assumption is that he intends to dedicate his life to the service of the church.

[574] When the baby makes his or her selection, the guests are treated with refreshments, and they all drink the health and future prospects of the small individual in question.

FUNERALS

• 764 On the death of a Maltese, two or
767 three women called *Neuuieha*, hired for
[533] the occasion, and attired in long mourning cloaks, immediately entered the house of the deceased singing in a low and dismal voice, some appropriate deathsong. These women cut away

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

branches of such vines as formed arbours in the courts, disturbed the furniture &c. in all the apartments, overturned the flower pots in the windows, broke some of the ornamental furniture, and carrying the fragments to a retired spot, threw them in a cauldron of boiling water, in which they mixed soot and ashes. With this liquid they stained all the doors in the house howling and sobbing most dismally whilst performing the operation. (*) The *neunieha* then proceeded to the chamber of the deceased, already in his coffin, and surrounded by his female relations, wearing veils over

(*) The custom of mourning for the dead in shrieks and howlings is of great antiquity, and prevails almost universally among the followers of Mahomet.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

764 their faces and black silk cloaks. (*)
767
[292] The room being stripped of all its furniture and hung with black cloth.

[302] The *neuuieha*, throwing themselves on their knees at the foot of the coffin, began singing the praises of the dead, and cut off handfuls of their hair which
[262] they spread over the coffin. On the same
[431] day, cakes and boiled wheat were distributed among all the relations, and the hair was cut off the tails of every horse at the stables belonging to the house of the deceased.

764 The funeral procession was always
533 composed of the relations in mourning preceded by some boys playing the fifes or trumpets.

[765] (*) The colours of the dress or habit. worn to signify
[822] grief are different in different countries. In Europe,
[171] the ordinary colour for mourning is black. *Black*, being the privation of light, is supposed to denote the privation of life.

PULLEYN *Origin & Inventions.*

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

or trumpets. Before the corpse was interred, a pillow filled with orange and laurel leaves (*) was placed under the head, and a carpet spread over the tomb, which was suffered to remain some days, to show that during that time it was forbidden to walk over it.

No fire was lighted for three days in the kitchen of the deceased, and either one of the relations or some most intimate friend sent a dinner to the inhabitants of the house, which they ate cross-legged on the floor.

Women on this occasion remained forty days in the house, but men went out on the seventh day, with their faces unshaven. (†)

(*) Orange trees were regarded by the Pagans as expiatory.

(†) Mourning among the ancients was expressed by very different signs; such as by rending of garments, wearing sack cloth, laying aside crowns &c. Thus Plutarch, in his life of Cato, relates, that from the time of his leaving the city with Pompey, he neither shaved his head, nor, as usual, wore his crown or garland.

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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Both Weddings and Funerals are in our duys celebrated in Malta in the same manner as in any other civilized part of the world.

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

The fratelli
763 —lay brethren of the congregation—hurry from their homes
794 to take their places in the procession of the Viatecum. Marching rapidly, like a company of soldiers, headed by a peasant ringing a staccato, commanding bell, some bearing tapers, some censers, all chanting the prayers for the dying, they pass
[793] quickly through the village street. Under a canopy, borne by two sturdy *fratelli*, goes the priest in his bright vestments, bearing God to the dying man.

The women hurry to place a light in their windows, kneel and pray as God passes.

So, with such poor pomp as these simple folk can muster,
764 the Prince of Peace comes to dying Zeppu. The funeral rites
[171] and customs differ hardly at all nowadays from those of other Catholic countries. But Zeppu's grandfather could remember a time when the Old Things were much in evidence.

764 There were the "Wailing Women" (whose name *neuieha*
767 survives in the sense of "one who constantly complains"). They wore long black robes, and chanted death-songs whose burden was a combination of praise for the deceased's virtues and rebuke for his having left them. They cut the vines from the courtyard, overturned the furniture, broke pottery, and mixed the fragments with soot and ashes, staining the doors
[302] of the bereaved house with the mixture. They cut pieces of their hair and scattered them over the coffin.

765 If the dead man possessed horses, cows, goats, all their tails
[262] had pieces cut from them in token of mourning. There was a
[764] form of "wake" where funeral cakes and boiled wheat were eaten. A carpet was spread over the tomb to prevent the unware from treading on it.

[372] No fire was lit in the house for three days after the funeral.
[302] The women kept to the house for forty days. The men, having remained indoors for seven days, went unshaven.

764 Here are clear signs of the most primitive funeral rites
174 and *taboos*. Death was a pollution—hence the segregation of

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

the relatives and the staining of the doors. Provision was made for the deceased's comfort in the other life by the breaking of his pottery—thus releasing the *manes* to accompany him in death.

The wake was a death feast originally designed to provide a sort of communion with the departed. Similarly, the cutting of the mourner's hair was intended to furnish a ritual link with the dead. Primitive tribes express the same idea in cannibalism and in funeral mutilations.

The cutting of the animals' tails was very probably a version of the sacrifice in expiation of the dead man's sins.

> ". . . Then they brought out a splendid white horse, and the priest cut some hair from its mane and tail and burned it on the altar, shouting 'A sacrifice!' . . . 'I saw poor Weland's face through the smoke, and I couldn't help laughing . . .' says Puck." [1]

Based on fear, as these "ancient fictions" were, they yet hid certain eternal truths.

The Old Things, with their complicated rituals, their theologies of terror, served their turn in leading mankind some distance on his upward march. Nowhere is their vague disembodied presence more felt than in Malta's rapidly dwindling countryside, where every stone may well have housed one of their altars. Not all of the Old Things were evil. The good ones have been adopted by Mother Church; but there remain those restless, evil ones who have never bowed down to the Nazarene. They hide in the shadows, angry and resentful.

THE HOUR OF THE OLD THINGS

Let us go out, at the third or fourth hour after midnight. Away from the clamorous ballrooms of the cramped city of

[1] *Puck of Pook's Hill.*

9: Luke G-5 (ca. 1920-ca. 1960) 1960
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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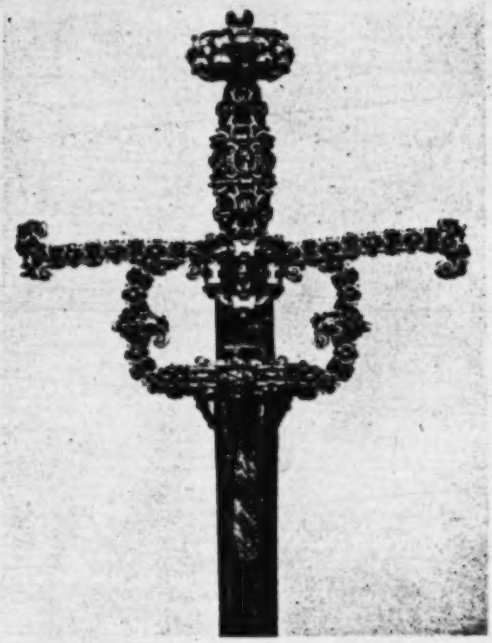

JEWELLED HILT OF SWORD GIVEN BY PHILIP II TO GRAND MASTER LA VALETTE
In the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.
[*See pp.* 51–52.]

CRYPT OF S. JOHN'S
The tomb of La Valette is in the niche on the left.
[*See pp.* 53–54.]

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[facing P. 65]

[pp. 65-67 Not processed]